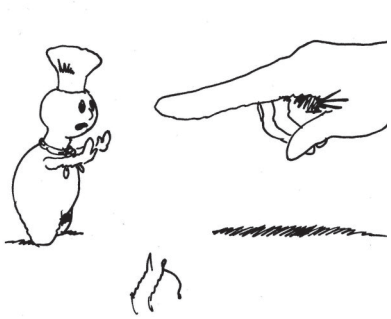
FOOD TALK

SANITATION TIPS FOR FOOD WORKERS — SPRING 2008

Also in this issue...



"Wait! No bare hand contact!"

What to Do When a Worker Is Ill

It's got to be one of the most difficult things in the Food Code to put into practice.

Sick workers can spread illness through the food they prepare, so managers may have to exclude or restrict them, depending on how serious their illness is.

Exclude means send them home. Restrict means they can still work, but not directly with food or with equipment and utensils that come in contact with food.

Sending sick workers home is not easy for a busy kitchen. And many food establishments do not pay sick employees for staying home, so this can be hard for the workers.

But it is the right thing to do. Nobody would want a sick worker to prepare tainted food for their children, so no one should prepare food for others if they have been vomiting or if they have diarrhea or jaundice (yellowing of eyes and skin).

According to the Food and Drug Administration's 2005 model Food Code, if a worker calls in sick, the manager should find out if the worker has been vomiting or has diarrhea or jaundice. For the first two symptoms, the worker needs to stay away until well after the symptoms have passed. If the worker has jaundice, he or she may have to stay away even longer.

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The Code has lots more to say about sick workers. For example, in kitchens that cater specifically to older adults, young children or individuals with weak immune systems, food workers need to stay home if they have a sore-throat with a fever. For this type of food facility, managers have to restrict a worker even if someone else in the worker's home is the one who has been vomiting or has diarrhea or jaundice. This is because the worker could already be ill without showing any signs and could transfer the illness through food.

A food worker with an infected cut may keep working, but must not have bare hand contact with ready-to-eat food.

In the case of workers who are restricted, the manager needs to discuss the symptoms with them, along with the need for handwashing and for no bare hand contact. The manager also needs to explain the establishment's illness reporting policy and to discuss how illness is transmitted through food by ill food workers.

It's a good idea for managers to discuss these things with all new employees.

see *SICK WORKERS* . . . page 2

Who is Most at Risk from Raw or Undercooked Foods?

Some Risky Foods	What Causes Illness?	Who is most at risk?
Raw or undercooked eggs. Caesar salad dressing, soft-cooked eggs, some puddings and custards, mousse, sauces, such as Hollandaise, made with raw eggs.	*Salmonella*	Everyone, but especially older adults, young children and individuals with weak immune systems.
Raw or undercooked meat, such as undercooked hamburger or carpaccio	*E. coli* O157:H7, *Salmonella*	Everyone, but especially older adults and young children.
Raw or undercooked molluscan shellfish, raw clams or oysters on the half shell.	*Vibrio vulnificus* and other vibrios, hepatitis A	Everyone, but especially those with liver disease or alcoholism, and those with weak immune systems.
Raw fish as in sushi, ceviche or tuna carpaccio.	Parasites, *Vibrio parahaemolyticus*	Everyone, but especially older adults and individuals with weak immune systems.
Raw dairy products such as soft cheeses made with unpasteurized milk.	*Listeria monocytogenes*, *E. coli* O157:H7, *Salmonella*	Everyone, but especially pregnant women, older adults, young children, and individuals with weak immune systems.

SICK WORKERS, from page 1

Health officials talk about the "Big Five" illnesses that have to be reported to the health department. They are: Norovirus, *E. coli* O157:H7 (and other strains of *E. coli* that produce a dangerous toxin), *Shigella*, Hepatitis A, and *Salmonella typhi*.

Of course, you will only find out that you have one of these if you go to a doctor and get tested.

Remember to Wash Your Hands!

Food Safety Experts Worry About *Listeria*

It doesn't look like much. In fact, you can't even see it without a microscope. But *Listeria monocytogenes* can be deadly. It is one of those bad bugs that can grow on food even when stored in a refrigerator. *Listeria* can even survive in a freezer!

Food safety officials worry about *Listeria* because it can be deadly for some consumers, such as older adults and people with weak immune systems. It can also cause pregnant women to lose their babies.

The illness caused by eating food contaminated with *Listeria* is called listeriosis. The symptoms include fever, chills, upset stomach, headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance, or convulsions.

One Out of Five

According to the Centers for Disease Control, *Listeria* kills one out of every five individuals with serious infections each year. Pregnant women are about 20 times more likely than other healthy adults to get listeriosis.

The bug can be found in lots of places, including soil, water, and in animals. It is sometimes found in meat and dairy products—especially if the products are made using unpasteurized milk.

Listeria can hide in processing facilities, often in drains and ventilation systems. In some cases, new construction or modifications at the plant allows the bug to get onto the processing equipment and from there into the food. Ready-to-eat deli foods can become contaminated after being cooked but before they are sealed into packages.

Outbreaks of listeriosis are sometimes linked to ready-to-eat foods such as hot dogs, luncheon meats, cold cuts, soft cheeses, deli-style meats, and poultry. For ready-to-eat foods, we have to trust manufacturers to keep their products free of the bug.

Listeria is not a problem in foods that are thoroughly cooked or reheated.

But remember that *Listeria* is not a problem in foods that you thoroughly cook or reheat to 165 degrees F. (74 degrees C.).

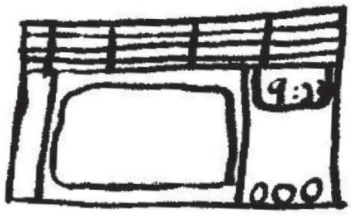
What You Can Do

As a food handler, you can play a key role in preventing foodborne illness by *Listeria*. Here are some simple ways to do that:

- Wash hands, knives and cutting boards thoroughly after preparing uncooked foods;
- Keep precooked or ready-to-eat foods refrigerated at 41 degrees Fahrenheit (5 degrees Celsius) or below;
- Use ready-to-eat food by the expiration date on the label;
- Keep uncooked meats separate from vegetables, cooked foods and ready-to-eat foods;
- Clean refrigerators regularly.

Food Talk is available in Spanish. See www.foodtalk.com or call (703) 548-3146 for details.

Be Careful With That Microwave Oven



An outbreak of salmonellosis (that's the foodborne illness caused by *Salmonella*) last fall linked to pot pies happened when some microwave ovens did not reheat the pies enough to kill the bad bugs.

Of course, *Salmonella* should not have been in the precooked pies in the first place. But reheating to a proper temperature should have killed the bugs.

Part of the problem was that some sections of the pies were not fully reheated in microwave ovens. In some cases, the consumers did not follow the instructions. But in others, the microwave ovens were not strong enough to kill the bugs in the cook time suggested on the product label.

The Grocery Manufacturers Association is working on new guidelines for cooking instructions for not ready-to-eat products, but it has found that there is no simple answer that fits all products, according to Jenny Scott, the group's vice president for food safety.

The GMA guidelines are based on the 2005 FDA model Food Code. They call for a general cooking temperature of 160 degrees F. (71 degrees C), and of 165 degrees F (74 degrees C) for poultry. But it is also possible to use combinations of cooking time and temperature.

The cooking procedures in the guidelines are designed to deal with *Listeria monocytogenes* because that bug is quite resistant to heat. But they will also work for *Salmonella*, Scott says.

You Can't Tell by Looking

You can't always tell just by looking whether a food has reached the proper temperature for food safety. Browning of the crust, melting of cheese, or rising steam might mean that the product is cooked thoroughly, or it might not.

If it says on the packaging that the product should sit for a period of time after cooking in the microwave, it is important to let it sit. The hold time allows the heat to reach every part of the food.

One simple way to check if a product cooked in a microwave has reached the proper temperature is to use a thermometer.

And remember to measure in more than one place, because some foods can have hot and cold spots.

Test Yourself on Food Safety

Try this quick test of your food safety knowledge. If you answer all six correctly, you could be a food safety manager.

1. Foodborne illness is often caused by:

   a. Leaving food in the temperature "danger zone" that allows bad bugs to grow quickly.
   b. Not washing hands after using the restroom.
   c. Contamination of cutting boards, utensils and other equipment that comes in contact with food.
   d. All of the above.

2. The best way to stop bad bugs from growing when defrosting food is to:

   a. Thaw the food in the refrigerator.
   b. Thaw the food in a microwave oven.
   c. Thaw the food at room temperature.
   d. Thaw the food under running water.

3. The biggest cause of foodborne illness in commercial kitchens is:

   a. Not cooking the food properly.
   b. Not washing hands.
   c. Cross contamination of food, either by dirty hands or utensils.
   d. Not cooling the food properly.

4. The best way to store items to stop pests getting at them is:

   a. On the floor, within six inches of the wall.
   b. On the floor, at least 12 inches from the wall.
   c. Off the floor, within 12 inches of the wall.
   d. Off the floor, at least 18 inches from the wall.

5. Food in refrigerators needs to be covered in order to:

   a. Stop the transfer of odors from other foods.
   b. Prevent crisp foods from becoming soft'
   c. Make the food stay fresh longer.
   d. Prevent contamination from food stored above them.

6. The fastest way to chill foods is to:

   a. Cool to room temperature and then refrigerate.
   b. Place the food container in cold running water.
   c. Place the food container in ice and water.
   d. Stir the food, along with one of the methods listed above.

Answers: 1 (d) 2 (a) 3 (d) 4 (d) 5 (d) 6 (d and c together)

FOOD TALK

Food Safety & Sanitation Program
555 Cordova St.
Anchorage, Alaska 99501